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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 005278

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/11/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: BJP TO FIGHT NEXT ELECTION UNDER ADVANI LEADERSHIP

REF: A. MUMBAI 699

[1](#)B. CHENNAI 605

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius For Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (U) The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) announced on December 10 that former Party President, former Deputy Prime Minister and longtime party heavyweight Lal Krishan Advani would be its candidate for Prime Minister going into the next national elections. In a show of party unity, BJP President Rajnath Singh made the announcement in the presence of Advani and the frontline BJP leadership, including former cabinet Ministers Jaswant Singh, Murli Manohar Joshi and Arun Jaitley and former Party president Venkaiah Naidu, although former Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha was noticeably absent. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh have endorsed the decision. Vajpayee reportedly called Advani after the announcement to congratulate him and Advani pledged to visit the ailing Vajpayee the next day to personally receive his blessings. As a historical note, it was Advani who, as BJP President in 1995, announced the party's decision to fight the 1996 national election with Vajpayee as its Prime Ministerial candidate.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Advani announcement puts to rest years of speculation by the chatteratti over leadership struggles in the BJP. Advani had hoped his coronation would occur in September at the BJP's national executive board meeting in Bhopal. While he was the star of the Bhopal meetings, the party did not name him as its Prime Ministerial candidate. Rumors had it that Rajnath Singh maneuvered to scuttle Advani's appointment. The BJP pass on Advani in Bhopal triggered a cottage industry of stories about internal leadership struggles in the BJP.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The timing of the Advani announcement is curious, coming a day ahead of the first round of polls in Gujarat (ref A). Observers have offered several theories about the timing:

-- Had the announcement been delayed any further, it would become drowned under the media's breathless coverage of the Gujarat election results, due on December 23.

-- The BJP expects Narendra Modi to win resoundingly in Gujarat; the Advani announcement is intended to neutralize any ambitions Modi may develop for moving to the national

stage after his big win and reassure voters nationwide that the BJP will remain in Advani's more moderate grasp;

-- The BJP is worried about Modi losing in Gujarat due to party dissidents who have deserted the BJP in droves; the Advani announcement is a signal to these dissidents that the party is bigger than Modi and they will be taken care of by the party's national leadership despite being shunned by Modi;

-- The BJP believes Modi will lose in Gujarat and his loss will lead the Congress to call early elections; the BJP is trying to get its house in order for these early elections.

13. (C) Comment: It is no surprise that the BJP named 80-year old L.K. Advani to lead the party into the next national election, due before May 2009. There is no other leader in the party who can match Advani's national and international name recognition and stature. He almost single handedly took the party from political obscurity -- the party won only two seats in the 1984 parliamentary elections -- to undisputed political power within fifteen years. As Deputy Prime Minister from 1999 to 2004, he practically ran the country; only Prime Minister Vajpayee had the political weight to question his decisions. Indeed, the BJP would have been ridiculed had it chosen someone else to lead the party into the next national elections. Analysts would have seen it as a sign of serious rot in the party. The party would have been ridiculed even more if it did not name a Prime Ministerial candidate at all because the BJP had incessantly chided the Congress Party for not declaring its Prime Ministerial candidate during the 2004 election.

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14. (C) Comment Continued: Depending on when the next national elections are held, Advani will have 4-16 months to get his party ready for the campaign. With the party leadership appearing to be united behind him, Advani will have a relatively free hand to shape the campaign. The broad issues that the party is expected to run on are: a) Hindutva and promotion of a strong nationalist identity, including the Ram Setu affair (ref B); b) sovereignty, security and terrorism, and; c) the economic basket of issues, including rising prices, impoverishment of farmers and international wheat procurement. These issues will no doubt be adjusted from region to region depending on their resonance with different electorates.

15. (C) Comment Continued: The BJP did not consult with its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners before taking the Advani decision. Since coalition alliances have become crucial to forming governments in Delhi, the BJP has some work to do in bringing its partners along on the decision. For his part, Advani has made a considerable effort during the last three years to develop relationships with the BJP's erstwhile NDA partners. Yet, because of the reputation he built as the Hindutva 'Iron Man' when he was orchestrating the BJP's rise to power in the 1980s and 1990s, Advani is less acceptable than Vajpayee as the face of the BJP to the liberal, secular and left-leaning sections of Indian society.

Yashwant Sinha, who was absent at Advani's coronation, fancies himself to be more appealing to the NDA. Allies such as Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (U) in Bihar and Chandrababu Naidu of the Telegu Dasam Party in Andhra Pradesh, who have large Muslim votes in their states but were comfortable with Vajpayee as the public face of the BJP, may find it harder to run with Advani at the head of the BJP ticket. To be fair to Advani, he is among the most moderate of the BJP politicians. Despite his past reputation as a Hindutva chauvinist, his performance when in power in 1999-2004 was mainstream moderate and he has refrained from inflammatory rhetoric and polarizing policy prescriptions.

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